Activity Center Planner

Setting up and rotating activity centers as a regular part of your program is a quick way to support STEM-centered independent explorations, especially – though not exclusively – with elementary-age students.

Well-planned activity centers engage children and youth in hands-on, independent exploration and learning targeted to specific objectives. Students can participate in developing ideas and materials for centers, and in setting them up and managing them. 'Centers' may be an area of the room, or simply activities kept in shoeboxes and worked with on a table.

Specify the learning objectives in the planning stage, then make the purpose, rules, and expectations clear to participants. Watch centers in use to see if they're working. Check if children seem engaged, distracted, or bored. Talk to students to gauge outcomes. Discuss with staff, and make revisions as needed.

Centers may be made available at set times, or during homework time for those who have no homework or who finish early, or as a break. As time goes on, build a repertoire of multiple centers that participants can choose from. Experiment with making several different activities available at the same time for students to move among freely.

Center Starter Ideas (grades shown in brackets)

Time: Calendars to customize, daily and weekly schedules with dates and times, clocks and watches to play with and take apart, appointment books (K-3)
Money: Penny jar, pennies, play money, menus, catalogs, store items (K-3), , balancing a checkbook, budgeting (5 and up)
Measuring: Measuring cups, measuring spoons, containers of different sizes, scale, sand, pebbles, liquids to measure (K-3), designing a garden or room (4 and up)
Sorting: Mixed bead, button, or bead collections for sorting, estimating, counting (different colors, sizes, shapes) (K-2)
Building, construction: Blocks, Legos, paper cups, cardboard, straws, twist-ties to construct two- and three-dimensional shapes (K-4); straws, tape, scissors, papers, graph paper, paint with challenges (3-6), plywood, wood scraps, tools, electronics equipment (6 and up)
Puzzles: All grades with increasing complexity
Shapes: Posters with shapes, crayons, pencils, construction paper, graph paper, different sizes of triangles, squares, rectangles, and circles, two- and three-dimensional shapes and objects to trace, draw, cut out, and play with (K-3)
Patterns and rhythms: Rhythm instruments to beat out patterns, paper for students to write beat patterns in symbols for others to follow (e.g., a = short tap, b = long tap). (2-4)
STEM Experiments and building kits: Use downloaded instructions and gather materials for experiments and make them available regularly. Also include building kits such as model airplanes and boats, paper airplanes, etc. (2-6)

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Activity Center Planner

STEM CENTER PLANNER

Description/theme of center _____
_____

STEM area focus (check all that apply)
___ Life sciences, biology ___ Physical sciences ___ Technology
___ Math ___ Engineering
___ Other

Learning objectives/purpose _____
_____

Number of users at one time ___
Primarily for ___ Individual work ___ Pairs ___ Small groups ___ Any

Instructions
___ Clearly written for users to understand
___ Needs to be explained or demonstrated
___ Users can explain to each other

Availability
___ Always ___ Days/times _____
___ Homework ___ By request

Supervision
___ None, general only ___ Periodic check
___ Demonstrations and explanations needed
___ Active supervision

Extensions and support
Additional resources
Expert contacts _____
Additional materials

Supplies needed
Instructions (instruction card or paper to include) _____
_____
_____

Materials, tools, equipment
_____
_____

Activity Center Planner

Observation Checklist
Actively used ___
Instructions clear, little supervision needed ___
Used by all participants ____
Positive outcomes ____
Meeting objectives ____

Comments, changes, extensions: